

Introduction

“It is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma,” Winston Churchill said of Russia in a radio broadcast in October 1939. To forecast its future course he added, “perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest.” Today, however, rational self-interest has proven a poor guide to understanding the war waged against the West that so deeply troubles us. The motive force that drives the players, the policies of the players, and the religion that inspires them have all proven altogether immune to the standard calculus of self-interest.

Even several decades into the irregular war waged by the jihadi world against the West, this new Sphinx still transfixes us to the point of making our societies unable to answer the fateful question upon which hinges their fate. Many explanations are proffered, and some do shed light upon the matter, but the nature of modern and contemporary jihad often remains shrouded in darkness: The analyses offered, regrettably, are frequently monocausal and often fit their author’s particular agenda more than the facts of the matter. Many cogent approaches have yielded enlightening results but they have made little headway toward informing policy makers and public opinion, both engulfed in confusion.

The expressions “war on terror” or “terrorism” have been justly criticized; they err gravely by focusing upon the tool and do not even properly capture the essence of terror as a continuation of politics, of terror as a system of power: By drawing attention to the terrorist act, they remove it from context, history, and etiology. They not only lose sight of the mind holding the weapon, but they ignore the mind moving the minds: “the mind of jihad.”

This research started more than a decade ago, when I began working on a project to chart the “spirit of nations” of important cultures and civilizations. Under that title, a transparent homage to Montesquieu’s *L’Esprit des*

lois, I published the first results regarding China, Japan, India, and Russia as *L'Esprit des Nations*. A second volume was going to be devoted to the world of Islam. I had been gathering materials for several years when the thunderbolt of September 11, 2001, gave my work greater urgency. The research was equally grounded in the object's history, its theology, its religion, its sociology, and its anthropology. As the analyst of war Bernard Brodie so cogently put it: "Good strategy presumes good anthropology and sociology. Some of the greatest military blunders of all times have resulted from juvenile evaluations in this department." I had hypothesized that the politics of nations was their theology diluted; in no case was this truer than in that of the world of Islam. All my work on the subject is built on that assumption. How could events, trends, and developments that occur in the world of Islam not be based on Islam?

The starting point, though, was an investigation into what could be called "the Arab way of war." Just as Victor Davis Hanson has shown that cultures wage wars in ways that fit their specific outlook and sociology, I sought to establish a causal connection between the tribal and nomadic way of life of the Arabs in history and the way in which terrorist warfare was practiced. This conception soon proved to be too narrow, and I was forced to abandon it, or rather to broaden it considerably: The matter was rooted in Islam, including in the complex relationship between the religion and the people of its birth. It was a matter of the mind.

It was not the last surprise this venture held in store for me: Time and again, I had to jettison my initial hypothesis and feel my way into unexpected pathways. If wonderment is the beginning of science, it never failed to force me to reassess my own conclusions. I discarded the notion of an Arab way of war as I realized in the action of the jihadis the exceptional prevalence of a cult of violence, of a glee to inflict suffering, in short, of a bloodlust that had little if any counterpart. This led to an investigation of an underlying "theology of death," which soon turned out to be the kernel of the jihadi outlook. Chapter 1, "We Love Death," accounts for this discovery.

The next surprise occurred as I sought to find comparable events, conceptions and practices in history. It turned out that the closest peers of the contemporary jihadis were the medieval millenarians of Europe with their Gnostic world-outlook and their own bloodlust. Across the divide of vastly different cultural idioms and religious beliefs, a striking similarity pointed to the etiology of utopia: Sectarian eschatological movements tend to breed behaviors of a similar nature. The conviction that one knows God's will is heady stuff that often leads to shedding torrents of blood in the name of

one's mission. Living in a "second reality" deemed superior to the "real" reality shared by the rest of mankind is a recipe for mass murder. This matter is presented in Chapter 2, "An Elite of Amoral Supermen."

The Gnostic inspiration of modern jihad, however similar to its earlier European counterparts, had to make sense within the world of Islam, its law, and its customs. It had to be authentic and organic. One concept emerged to embody revolutionary millenarianism within Islam, that of the Mahdi, the expected and divinely guided one who will appear at the end of times to set the world right. Muslim apocalyptic, I had to discover, were never far from the mind of jihad, to the point that radical Islam was synonymous with Mahdism, the politicized version of the religious concept. This story is developed in Chapter 3, "The Gnostic Mahdi."

Cleaving the world between elects and damned, between the elects' territory and that of the rest, the separation of the human race between an "inside" and an "outside," irresistibly pointed to the spontaneous outlook of tribal societies, the radical split between "us" and "them." A tribal matrix had to be operative: I examined the nature and the implications of the concepts of *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-Harb*, the two abodes into which the world is sundered, and their mutual relationship in Chapter 4, "Manichean Tribalism."

I had long been tantalized by a certain "Leninist" tonality to many texts written by the leading ideologues of radical Islam, such as Abu Ala Maududi or Sayyid Qutb. Lines of communication between Bolsheviks and jihadis were not immediately apparent. What this inquiry dug up was one of the strangest revelations: I uncovered a lavish pattern of relations between radical Islam and Soviet communism, starting in the earliest days of Lenin's putsch, and, essentially, never ending. Strangely, this pattern had started with the First World War's "Jihad Made in Germany" before mutating into a Soviet-Muslim affair: What is reported in Chapter 5, "The Odd Pedigree of Modern Jihad," deserved sustained attention.

It was now possible to address the bizarre concept of "Islamic Revolution," which became so central to radical Islam. The intellectual "greenhouses," the cooperation between Shiites and Sunni, the Muslim Brothers, the ayatollahs, and the South Asian Muslims, which together created the contemporary jihadi ideology is the object of Chapter 6, "The Mutated Virus: 'Islamic Revolution.'"

Finally, reverting to the starting point, it became possible to address the question of "terror." Examining crucial turning points in modern jihadi action, Chapter 7, "Jihad as Terror," tried to establish how the Quranic

concept of war – “to strike terror in the heart of the enemy” – has morphed in modern times into a compound of Gnostic cult, tribal outlook, Islamic jihad, and Bolshevik terror. It has been the aim of this book to explore how this happened and what it generated.

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I

“We Love Death”

You only love talking of death and the dead and I have wearied of all that.
Naguib Mahfuz

Terrorists

The endless Peloponnesian War led to such an erosion of moral values, remarked Greek historian Thucydides, that the “revolutionary passions” it unleashed broke the time-honored boundaries of civility, decency, and respect for human life:

Revolution thus ran its course from city to city, and the places where it arrived at last, from having heard what had been done before, carried to a still greater extent the refinement of their inventions, as manifested in the cunning of their enterprises and the atrocity of their reprisals. Words had to change their ordinary meaning. [...] In the confusion into which life was now thrown in the cities, human nature, always rebelling against the law and now its master, gladly showed itself ungoverned in passion, above respect for justice . . . doing away with those general laws to which all alike can look for salvation in adversity.¹

By exalting the most evil passions, the never-ending war dissolved society into anomie. But what happens if such an inversion of values, instead of a temporary aberration, becomes permanent, if it becomes an influential doctrine, if it reshapes the minds of many? In the modern world, the fateful phrase uttered by Friedrich Nietzsche, “God is dead,” turned anomie into nihilism, it turned social cataclysm into doctrine. Drawing radical consequences, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov’s assertion “If

¹ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 3.82.3–6 and 3.84.2.

God is dead, everything is permitted” encapsulated for the nineteenth century this very inversion of values. Absent moorings of any sort, the disappearance of “God,” the fundamental anchor of morality, legitimized the stupendous contention that “everything is permitted.” So were overthrown thousands of years of social life.

Some claimed for themselves the privilege – “If God is dead . . .” – at all times, in the name and for the sake of their good intent. It left their untrammelled personal decision the judge and arbiter of life and death. The Russian terrorists of the late nineteenth century were aptly called “Nihilists.”

Starting in the 1860s, in several successive waves (late 1860s, 1878–81, 1887–90, 1902–13), a series of acts of terror stunned Russia. Pistols and bombs felled members of the Russian ruling class. At first, good Russian society treated the terrorists with some respect, as noble rebels with a cause. To effect change, it was said that no way but terror was available. Though they did kill, these young souls loathed killing.² Soon enough, however, this “good” terrorism yielded to far more egregious action. Political killing became indiscriminate. Hails of bombs and bullets fell grand dukes, ministers and officials, and senior bureaucrats. Finally, the terrorists murdered Czar Alexander II the Liberator, arguably the most forward-looking and liberalizing monarch in Russian history, who had abolished serfdom.

The political killing spree now seemed to herald a new era of politics, marked by actions wholly disconnected from recognizable moral moorings.³ Until then, for all its violence, European history had only known two forms of political murder: regicide, which targeted rulers exclusively, and Robespierre’s *Terreur* where the state unilaterally cast aside all custom and suspended all laws to decree the death of opponents, in a fashion reminiscent of ancient Roman proscriptions, but in the name of an ideology.⁴ Apologists justified both regicide and *Terreur* by the excellence and purity of the intent: the end justified the means.

In his novel *The Devils* (or *The Possessed*), Dostoyevsky portrayed a group of Nihilists who turned their energies to outright murder. The novelist was drawing from the real-life case of Sergei Nechaev, a young thug and petty delinquent, who coauthored a *Catechism of a Revolutionist* (1869)

² Walter Laqueur, *No End to War: Terrorism in the 21st Century*, New York & London, Continuum, 2004, 11. Also see Albert Camus, *Les Justes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1952.

³ See, inter alia, Ronald Hingley, *Russian Radicals and Revolutionaries in the Reign of Alexander II (1855–1881)*, London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967; [Général] Alexandre Spiridovich, *Histoire du terrorisme russe (1886–1917)*, Paris, Payot, 1930.

⁴ Jacob L. Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase*, New York, Frederick A. Prager Publishers, 1960.

“We Love Death”

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with aging anarchist doctrinaire Mikhail Bakunin. It included the famous passage:

The Revolutionist is a doomed man. He has no private interests, no affairs, sentiments, ties, property nor even a name of his own. His entire being is devoured by one purpose, one thought, one passion – the revolution. Heart and soul, not merely by word but by deed, he has severed every link with the social order and with the entire civilized world; with the laws, good manners, conventions, and morality of that world. He is its merciless enemy and continues to inhabit it with only one purpose – to destroy it.

It went on to say:

Our mission is terrible, total, general, pitiless destruction. [...] The goal is but one: the fastest possible destruction of this filthy regime. [...] [Nechaev’s new man] is not a revolutionist if he has pity for anything in this world. He must be able to destroy situations, relations or people that belong to this world: all of those must be equally hateful to him [because] he has [waged] a war of cleansing. He does not mix [with them]. He is of another nature. He belongs in the other society. He is not linked to the common morality, for there is no such thing. He does not acknowledge the morality of this filthy society. On the other hand, he is absolutely linked to the morality that stems from the [revolutionary] doctrine and which prevails amongst those who know. [...] He despises and detests the present morality of society in all its motivations and its expressions. To him, moral is what contributes to the triumph of the revolution, immoral and criminal what hinders it.

Nechaev could conclude: “Between [the revolutionary] on the one hand, the State and society on the other, there exists a state of war, visible or invisible, but permanent and implacable, a life and death war.” The “filthy society” is divided amongst several categories for purposes of its destruction: The first category includes those sentenced to death without delay, those lower down in the killing order will be killed based “on the degree of usefulness of their death for the cause of the revolution.”⁵

In its radical rejection of commonly accepted norms and values, in its methods, Nechaev’s terror was a forerunner of the great totalitarian terror of the twentieth century in its various forms, Bolshevism, national socialism, fascism, and Maoism. His were but two-bit assassinations compared to the massive massacres that were to follow, but his short odyssey in murder captured the essence of the phenomenon.⁶

⁵ Quoted by Alain Besançon, *Les origines intellectuelles du Léninisme*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1977, 133–8.

⁶ See Richard Pipes, *The Unknown Lenin: From the secret Archives*, New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1996; V. Zazubrin, *Shchepka [Le tchékiste]*, Paris, Christian Bourgeois, 1992].

If we replace “revolutionist” by *mujahid* and “filthy society” by *jabiliyya*, the concept of the modern paganism and barbarism developed especially by radical Islamist theoreticians Maududi and Sayyid Qutb, Nihilists and jihadis are a match. In a bizarre twist of history, the Russian Nihilists’ departure from the common grounds of accepted norms of human conduct has in turn been turned upside down by Islamic terrorists. The Islamists justify their own denial of the norms that prevail in any society as preconditions for society’s own survival – whichever the religion – by invoking God’s will: “God wills it, everything is therefore permitted,” as one may sum up their apologies *pro suo*, as will be documented, where “everything” means types of crimes loathed by societies everywhere.

Instrumental or accidental crimes, crimes committed in a fit, are “normal” crimes: A burglar kills to protect his anonymity; a gang leader orders a witness to be eliminated to prevent him from testifying; a jealous spouse kills in a fit of rage or passion. Rarely does this involve a positive lust for blood and joy of killing. If so, normal crime has morphed into an abnormal, exceptional form of crime. The lust for blood and killing expresses an infinite lust for power, control, and domination. Is there a greater (if pathological), more intoxicating sense of power than that in which a man tortures, invades, torments, maims the body, severs limbs and more of another one? *Wille zur Macht*, the will to power, the exacerbated desire for overpowering and controlling, expresses itself *in fine* as bloodlust.

Bloodlust

Leon Klinghoffer, a wheelchair-bound 69-year-old, was shot to death and then thrown overboard off the cruise ship *Achille-Lauro* by the Palestinian terrorists of Abu Abbas (the Palestine Liberation Front, a member group of the Palestine Liberation Organization) on October 7, 1985.⁷ The throat of a first-class passenger on board American Airlines Flight 11 on September 11, 2001, was needlessly slit. Both cases were gratuitous atrocities, unless some inner urge impelled the killers: What generates this urge is the object of this investigation. Both, however, were witnessed but not recorded. But the decapitation on camera of Nicholas Berg in Iraq, the filmed beheading of Paul Johnson in Saudi Arabia, Daniel Pearl’s throat being slit “live” in Pakistan,⁸ Margaret Hassan being made to cry and beg for her life in Iraq

⁷ Barry Rubin and Judith Kolp Rubin, *Yasir Arafat: A Political Biography*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, 106.

⁸ According to published reports, when Daniel Pearl’s throat was first slashed, a technical error caused it not to be captured on film. In the video, Pearl’s corpse is shown naked from the

in front of her tormentors’ camcorder, and many other such instances of snuff movies shot and spread by Islamists are *prima facie* evidence in the diagnosis: The nature of worldwide Islamist terror is *sui generis*, its nature different from the “usual” forms of terrorism with which it has often been assimilated. This terror is an Islamist innovation, and it has remained mostly an Islamist monopoly.⁹

Not only were many terrorist atrocities filmed, they were publicized, reproduced on videotapes, and aired around the clock by al-Jazeera and other Middle Eastern television channels. This was not just bragging: it was flaunting one’s exhilarating sense of total power and offering the viewing public a chance vicariously to partake in it. The killing of Westerners gave viewers, as it gave perpetrators, a sense of identity.

It was a pornography of crime, snuff movies served as political fare, or, even worse, as identity fare: This, O Muslim brothers, is who we are; we slay for our God, our God demands the slaying. I kill, therefore I am. The mass consumption of Islamist snuff movies in most of the Muslim world must be explained. The May 2004 videotaped decapitation of Nicholas Berg, released by the group led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, was the most popular search item on the Internet.¹⁰ Demand meets supply: Islamists provide the show; masses of television viewers avidly lap it up. If a wave of revulsion greeted the gruesome show, it would simply not be aired. Viewers recognize something of themselves in the shows, showmasters project and propose a sense of identity: *Allahu akbar* ululated as basso continuo while a human being is being bled like an animal. A conception that treats human beings like animals is one that fails to make a difference between man and beast. It is getting closer to the ancient practice of human sacrifice.¹¹ “Whoever has

waist up, laying on a blanket; a man’s arm is holding his head forward so that his cut neck cannot be seen. With the knife in his other hand, the man proceeds to cut deeper into Pearl’s neck, from the back to the front. There is little blood. The remaining 90 seconds of the video consist of a list of demands scrolling by, superimposed over a picture of Pearl’s severed head being held by the hair.

⁹ Explaining Islamist terror with its specific forms by arguing that “occupation” or “grievances” cause it must bear the burden of explaining why other cultures do not cause similar effects or reactions. Short of taking the culture into account, the “explanation” is little more than a peremptory tautology.

¹⁰ Ibrahim al-Marashi, “Iraq’s Hostage Crisis: Kidnapping, Mass Media and the Iraqi Insurgency,” *The Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA), vol. 8 (December 2004), p. 9.

¹¹ The interest in the gory and the macabre often exploited by sensationalist media in the West is of a different nature: It manipulates the prurient for its own sake (or for profit), whereas Islamist snuff systematically shows the “enemies of Allah” being gored, and the “soldiers of Allah” goring them.

lived in the Orient knows how alive the persuasion has remained to this day that the blood spilled is possessed of incontrovertibly purifying virtue.”¹²

A 2000 videofilm produced and distributed by the London-based jihadi Azzam Films shows an ambush in Chechnya: The *Mujahideen* parade a lone Russian survivor, a terrified boy who might not be much older than 18. In shock, he staggers and is machine-gunned, while a call to prayer in Arabic is intoned, and a litany of martial songs is played. Bloody corpses are displayed. The scene is in Duba-Yort in Chechnya, “Allahu akbar” is chanted three times in front of the Russian corpses; the snow is red-gored, the Mujahideen show pride, they desecrate the corpses by kicking them.¹³

The Martyrs of Bosnia is a more ambitious and more professional movie. It shows the stories of foreign *Mujahideen* killed in Bosnia.¹⁴ It starts with a quote by Osama bin Laden’s mentor Abdullah Azzam: “Indeed the manuscripts of history are not scribed except with the blood of these ‘*shahada*’ [martyrs].” Most of the movie is devoted to close-up mug shots of dead *Mujahideen*, in *rigor mortis*, their mangled bodies, the flies, with purposeful attention upon the caked-up blood on face and body. Every corpse is named; the time of his arrival in Bosnia and that of his death are mentioned. The 72 wives they will have found in paradise are mentioned repeatedly, as is their ability to intercede for their families. Some of the fixed shots show severed heads, eyes gouged out. The movie goes on for dozens of minutes; an erratic, rambling sermon is delivered while more “martyrs” are shown. Sometimes a testimonial from a colleague is read: “He had been hit in the head by a sniper’s bullet which led to his death, and I smelled a pleasant smell emanating from him.” Evidently, the filmmakers believe that death, not in the abstract, but death in all its anatomical, bodily aspects, fluids and all, is by itself motivational, and the sight of death an appealing inspiration. The movie ends with copious quotes from Abdullah Azzam, Sayyid Qutb, Sheikh Yasin, and other martyrs.

Elsewhere, a videofilm shot in Iraq opens with a martial quote from the Quran; a middle-aged, redheaded man is shown crouching, his hands restrained, the prisoner of two jihadis who are clad in black and clutching submachine guns. The man is blindfolded; his identification is shown to the

¹² Alfred Morabia, *Le Ĝihad dans l’Islam médiéval: le combat sacré des origines au XIIè siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1993, p. 18.

¹³ My heartfelt thanks to Steve Emerson and The Investigative Project of Washington, DC, especially Ryan Evans, who helped me into their vast video archives. All the following snapshots were gleaned there.

¹⁴ London, Azzam Publications, BCM Uhud, 2000. See www.azzam.com, accessed November 11, 2005.